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JOSE RAMOS-HORTA

FUNU: THE UNFINISHED SAGE OF EAST TIMOR

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Indonesia invaded East Timor in December 1975. Funu: The Unfinished Saga of East Timor is an account of what led up to that invasion and what has occurred during the past decade. (The word "Funu" means "war".)

Jose Ramos-Horta, was, in late November 1975, the world's youngest foreign minister (aged 25 years). He was sworn in by the newly-formed Government of the Democratic Republic of East Timor. Indonesia invaded a few days later and Mr Ramos-Horta has since been living in exile.

East Timor was a Portugese colony for about 500 years. It was, therefore, one of the world's oldest colonies. This question of age is important since it erodes Indonesia's claim to East Timor. Modern Indonesia is based on the Dutch colonies to Australia's north. East Timor was never part of that empire. The 1975 Indonesian invasion was not some form of "liberation" but an explicit attack by one nation upon another. This book is a terrible indictment of both Indonesia and those nations (including Australia) which have done little to oppose continued Indonesian occupation.

By 1974, Portugal was the last European nation with an extensive empire overseas. Having been a super power 500 years ago, it was now bankrupting itself trying to stop the rebellions in its African colonies. On a per capita basis, Portugal was spending more on its colonial wars than was the United States in Vietnam.

In April 1974, the Portugese military rebelled and overthrew their government. The African colonies, such as Angola and Mozambique, were put on the path to independence.

The 700,000 people in far away East Timor got far less attention. They were on the periphery of empire and on the margin of history.

Between April 1974 and December 1975 there was confusion in East Timor. The Portugese were anxious to get out as quickly as possible. Indeed, Mr Ramos-Horta claims that the hasty withdrawal of Portugese forces was a signal to Indonesia that an invasion would result in little official Portugese criticism. Some East Timorese hoped for continued Portugese control, if only to help make the nation ready for independence. A few wanted integration into Indonesia. Many others wanted immediate independence.

Mr Ramos-Horta, a young journalist, was caught up in all this chaos. He did not expect to become a politician, let alone one governing an independent nation. This fascinating story is also partly an autobiography of how fate picks up an unassuming young person and hurls him into the international political arena.

Indonesia invaded in December 1975. In the resulting war and famine about 200,000 people died (that is almost a third of the total population).

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East Timor has been for the past decade a small pawn in the international chess game. If East Timor had been invaded by the Soviet Union or the United States then it would have attracted far more attention. But, instead, one third of a nation has perished in an unreported invasion which has attracted little official criticism.

Indonesia is the world's fifth most populated nation and a leader of the non-aligned Third World countries. Both super powers would like to remain on good terms with it. The United States is currently its major super power ally and so the United States did not oppose the invasion. The USSR has been little better.

Many Third World nations have also not opposed the Indonesian invasion. Moslem nations support Indonesia, which is the most populous Moslem nation.

Despite being a Catholic country, East Timor has received only a little support from Christian churches. The Vatican has been slow to support its own. Protestant churches seek to maintain good relations with the Protestants in Indonesia, who support the occupation. Therefore, in the higher interests of church politics, Protestant churches have not been nearly as vocal in their criticism of Indonesia as they have been on situations in other nations.

Australia has been consistently pro-Indonesian over East Timor. Australian governments may come and go but the policy has been the same.

As Mr Ramos-Horta says, this is an unfinished saga. A few church groups, human rights organizations, and the former Portugese nations in Africa continue to support East Timor. This is an unfinished story. It will long linger as a reminder of international political opportunitism and conspiracy. The East Timorese will continue their resistance, even if the rest of the world would like to forget about them. After all, it is their country and they have nowhere else to go.